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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2020  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4208  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1885  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2456  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2817  
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

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SENSITIVE  
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: RUSSIAN MEDIA'S HEAVY INFLUENCE ON LOCAL  
VIEWS ON GEORGIA CONFLICT

REFTEL: ASHGABAT 1076

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: In an informal, unscientific survey of local citizens, post found general public support (approx. 75%) for Russia's point of view in the conflict with Georgia. There is a distinction between those who watch Russian satellite TV and those who seek out other sources for news, with those exclusively watching Russian TV for news being nearly universal in their agreement with Russian views. Due to the limited information in Turkmen state-controlled media and the general information vacuum and linguistic obstacles to other news or views, there is little to counter Russian media interpretations of the conflict in Georgia.  
END SUMMARY.

AN INFORMATION VACUUM FILLED BY RUSSIAN MEDIA

13. (SBU) Turkmenistan's state controlled-media rarely report on international events. In those rare cases when it does, the information provided is minimal and carefully omits analysis or possible hints of controversy. There is no functioning independent media in the country and access to opposition media abroad is limited. As a result, the vast majority of Turkmen obtain their news, especially international news, from Russian satellite television.

LACK OF PUBLIC OPINION DATA

14. (SBU) No public opinion polling exists in Turkmenistan, which despite reform remains officially neutral. Public demonstrations are taboo. However, locals speak openly with friends and family about their political outlook. Therefore, post can only rely on an informal, unscientific sampling in order to gauge the public opinion on issues - in this case the war in Georgia.

INFORMAL SURVEY RESULTS

15. (SBU) Family and friends of Public Affairs Section FSNs overwhelmingly get their news from Russian satellite channels. All - 100% - report that they watch Russian satellite TV for news. Only an estimated 15% seek out other news outlets to supplement what they

have seen on Russian TV. Small percentages watch English language broadcasts such as BBC or CNN, Turkish satellite channels, or get news from the Internet (NOTE: Internet penetration in Turkmenistan, although allegedly growing, still appears to be around 1%. For most users the quality of connection is low. END NOTE.)

#### PRO-RUSSIAN VIEWS FROM RUSSIAN TV NEARLY GUARANTEED

16. (SBU) There appears to be a strong correlation of a pro-Russian opinion and watching Russian satellite TV. As a very rough estimate, 75% of the friends and family of U.S. Embassy Public Affairs FSNs support the Russian viewpoint on the conflict in Georgia. Presumably, this would be higher among the general population which has no association with the U.S. government. All of those in agreement with Russian policy get their news exclusively or primarily from Russian TV. It appears that a small portion, perhaps 5-10% of those who watch only Russian TV, doubt its accuracy or do not support Russian views.

#### MIXED VIEWS AMONG THE OTHERS - FROM MIXED SOURCES

17. (SBU) The remaining 25% who do not agree with Russia on the Georgia conflict, do not specifically support U.S. views or oppose Russia's position. About 10-15% of those surveyed agree with U.S. policy or clearly view Russia's actions as inappropriate. Meanwhile, about 10-15% don't care or are undecided, are often suspicious of both sides in the conflict and/or doubt much information from either Russian or non-Russian media sources. This estimated quarter of the informal survey population watches Russian TV, in addition to western media outlets or perhaps obtain news online. For most of these viewers, foreign language skills beyond

ASHGABAT 00001119 002 OF 002

Russian or Turkmen are critical for their ability to access alternative viewpoints.

#### SAAKASHVILI HAS A BAD RAP IN TURKMENISTAN

18. (SBU) Even among those who disagree with Russian actions in Georgia, many blame Georgian President Saakashvili or at the least have a negative opinion of him. Most people who support Russia actions, believed it likely that genocide or some kind of atrocity had been committed by Georgian forces. Only about half of those with pro-Russian views raised a negative opinion of U.S. support for Georgia, but still many saw the U.S. position reflecting a double standard, i.e. supporting Kosovo's independence, but not South Ossetia or Abkhazia's independence. A small minority, perhaps 5% (especially those who watch Western news media) expressed the view that Russia was attempting to dominate former Soviet countries.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: In a near information vacuum, the Turkmen public has few choices for international news. Combined with Turkmenistan's general isolation and linguistic obstacles to viewing non-Russian media, there is little that can counter Russian satellite TV's reporting and analysis of the crisis in Georgia. As a result, it appears that high numbers of Turkmen, despite their country's official neutrality, would side with Russia in the conflict. Although this informal survey was far from scientific, it was conducted among friends and family of well-educated Embassy FSNs. Presumably, the pro-Russian attitudes would be higher among the population as a whole, which has no personal ties to the U.S. Embassy. END COMMENT.

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